

**Diasporic Sensibility in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine'**

Dr. Dhanesh Mohan Bartwal

Assistant Professor in English

Department of Applied Sciences and Humanities

THDC- Institute of Hydropower Engineering and Technology

(A Constituent College of Uttarakhand Technical University),

B. Puram, NTT, UK, INDIA

*dbartwal81@gmail.com*

**Abstract**

*The Interpreter of Maladies (1999) is the collection of nine short stories written by Jhumpa Lahiri. This Pulitzer Prize winning book has credited worldwide appreciation in the account of the authoress for psychological portraying of human beings' relationships. Maximum stories of the book represent the emotions of rootlessness, which have portrayed by the authoress through her literary brush, of those Indians who have been migrated from their native land to pursue their identities, dreams, desires as well as aspirations, and encountered with different cultures which differ from their inherent ethics. Lahiri not only exhibits Mr. Pirzada's mental instability for his war ridden family but also depicts the role of diasporic sensibility that creates a empathetic as well as harmonious rapport between two different cultures in the United State of America in her second short story 'When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine' in the book. The aim of the present paper is to explore Lahiri's portrayal of the empathetic rapport between two different religions. The author of the paper has tried to explore an overview of diaspora and its relation with the literature. For this, he has opted the second story of Lahiri's The Interpreter of Maladies as a case study to trace the diasporic sensibility, and its role to unite two opposite religions in the humanistic cord in the alien land.*

**Keywords:** - diasporic sensibility, empathetic, humanistic, immigrated, migrated, rootlessness.

The aspirations of human being for better opportunities have delimited the expansion of the entire world. He has been travelling from one place to another for fulfilling his needs since time immemorial. The spirit of globalisation has modified the desires of human being, and he migrates to the different parts of the world for the sake of good education, entertainment, living standard, occupation, and security. But, apart from his desires, he encounters with such kinds of cultures and values in the alien lands which are completely contradictory from his own inherited beliefs and customs. Moreover, his efforts to adapt the cultures of inhabiting countries and to get habitual with the mores of there can not detach him from his inherent cultures which always connect him close to the spirit of native countries, and it leads the sense of culture conflicts. He makes every possible effort to escape from losing cultural identity, and, for this, the first generation of immigrant and migrated people hand over the cultural bags to their next generation for inculcating the essential elements of their own cultural inheritance in the alien land. In literature those writers who write, being settled down in foreign land, about the cultures, customs, values, and identity of their homeland are known as the ‘diasporic writers’.

The term ‘diaspora’ has become a crucial term in the perspective of cultural and ethnic studies in the modern literature. The etymological study of this term depicts that it has been derived from Greek language – *dia-speirein* – which gives a clear meaning by combining together it- *dia* (means across or through) and *speirein* (means scatter)- means scatter across or through. Stephane Dufoix considers this term in his book entitled *Diasporas* as an “inflated” word (Dufoix, 108) which is frequently used for those dispersed people or group of people in around the world who belong to same piece of land as well as identity, and share “fellow feelings” (71) regarding compassion and belongingness of their community. Panda and Bhakat explain it in an understandable manner as, “Agricultural metaphor connected with the term allows us to see the case of migration as the dispersal of seeds in an alien and unfavourable land.” (Panda and Bhakat, 166) This term is firmly associated with “the movement of the Jewish people away from their own country to live and work in other countries” (Hornby, 418) with the strong desire to turn up again in their country. Moreover, in its beginning, “the term was originally used with a religious meaning until the 1950’s” (Dufoix, 17) but with the passing of time it had been considered as an area of study for the scholars across the world to describe the historical dispersal of those people, such as Jews, Armenians, Africans etc, who had lost their native places due to severe conditions of life. William Safran shares his views about it as,

the diasporic community includes several categories of individuals (refugees, expatriates, alien residents, ethnic and racial minorities) living outside their homeland and sharing a series of common features,

such as history of dispersal, vision and memories of the lost homeland, alienation in the host land, yearning for an eventual return and collective identity. (Safran, 83)

But, apart from above description, the term diaspora may not be used as a separatist term because it develops a sense of transcultural and transnationalism movement which crosses boundaries of the nations, and includes the struggle of local individuals to maintain their cultural identity in the unfamiliar host society. The diasporic studies exhibit the conventional and strict idea of identity in the most understandable notions of cross-cultural which is the outcome of the close encounter of hybridisation and intercultural sensibility. Avtar Brah shares his views about Diaspora on the basis of contemporary migration of South Asian communities in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) as, “conceptual mapping which defies the search for originally absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestation of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity.” (Brah, 196)

The writings of South Asian writers are a crucial aspect for Diasporic studies due to its charismatic illustrations about the sensibility of diasporic literature. The Indian Diaspora has begun since the migration of Indians to the other continents of the world. The first indication of Indian migration has been traced from the colonised India when the Indians migrated from other colonised places during Britishers’ rule, like Fiji, South Africa, Surinam, Malaysia, Trinidad, West Indies etc., due to the capitalism of British Empire for searching the work in sugar, tea, rubber plantations and labourers in other agriculture fields from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to till India got independence from British rule in 1947. But, from 1955 onwards when Indian Citizen Act came into force and double citizenship prevailed, and with the approaches of advance capitalism, globalisation and hypermobility, Indians are heading towards frequently to other continents of the world, like Europe, United State of America, Canada etc., for variety of aspirations like studies, employments, securities, medicals etc., and, now, the Indian community is the largest community in the world, after Chinese community, who lives around the world. Vijay Mishra comments on it, “this modern and late-capitalist migrant wave is the final step of the long journey of the Indian Diaspora and it represents the privileged site of the diasporic discourse about Indian dispersion.” (Mishra, 3)

United States of America, an incredible place, attracts the mind of every person especially South Asia and Middle East’s people to get the best opportunities and settle down there after the Hart-Celler Act, a new American Policy; in which any new cultural community can be inhabited in the country, from 1965. Therefore, many proficient technocrats, professionals; doctors, engineers, scientists, academicians, and research scholars from middle or upper-middle class people migrate from India in search for their career as

well as prosperity. Jhumpa Lahiri (July 11, 1967), born in London and brought up in Rhode Island, a second generation Indian diasporic writer, is one of those people whose parents emigrated from India to England in search of their dreams as well as career. Her Bengali parents got shifted to the United States of America when she was two years old. Seven seas far away from her homeland, having Indian parents and their longing for native land, developed in her keen sensibility for India and its issues which made her a celebrated author of Indian Diasporic writings, and, therefore, she wrote well acclaimed collection of nine short stories under the title of *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), which created “history in becoming the first Indian author to win prestigious Pulitzer Prize in USA for her collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*.” (Naik and Narayan, 36) Instead of this, the concurrent sensible thought for India and Indian family has been revealed from her other creations. She wrote her first novel *The Namesake* (2003), second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and another novel *The Lowland* (2013), for which she had been short listed for Man Booker Prize, with the theme and consciousness of India.

Apart from Jhumpa Lahiri, there are number of veteran and prominent Indian Diasporic writers in the world literature, the second or third generation of immigrant and migrated people, born and brought up or born in their native place and brought up outside their homeland, who often create skilfully their creation as an objective in unprejudiced manner having the theme of their homeland, and their efforts as well as creations have been well acclaimed by the readers across the world. Some other Indian Diasporic writers, who have been nurtured in the culture of alien land but the spirit of Indianess has been prevailed in their consciousness, like Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Aravind Adiga, Bharati Mukherjee, G.V. Desani, Kamala Markandya, Kiran Desai, Meena Alexander, Raja Rao, Rohitan Mistry, Salman Rushdie, are famous for presenting the Indian sensibility in the world literature in the artistic manner. These eminent authors write in the perspective of India, and its culture and custom.

The Indians, who migrate to the developed or First World nations in search of a better life, find themselves in the fringe of unfamiliar society, and struggle to establish their own identity in the alien land. Some of them find mental instability to cope up with this new culture and its ethics. Although, the children who take birth from migrants get benefit of better life and settlement in the First World but “their sense of identity borne from living in a diasporic community is influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents”. (McLeod, 2007) This cross cultural instability of mind is the most prominent aspect of diaspora. Jhumpa Lahiri presents in her creations the voice of those Indians who are struggling between two varied cultures for making their own identity in America. Jaydeep Sarangi illustrates about Jhumpa Lahiri’s depiction of cross-culturalism in her short stories

collection entitled *The Interpreter of Maladies* that her, “short-stories are the gate way into the large submerged territory of cross-culturalism. It is a metaphor to share cultures..... Something that will allow them or us to share, instead of dividing, what is on either side?” (Sarangi, 117)

Lahiri has poured the blend of diasporic existence and complex culture plight with different ways in every short story of *Interpreter of Maladies* which project a unique style and presentation of stories. The first story of the book ‘The Temporary Matter’ has depicted an unsuccessful married life of Shoba and Shukumar in America which is on the verge of destruction. But the power cut produces a ray of hope for their scattered married life for sharing some veiling secrets through which they become able to heel their life. ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ is the third story of the book in which American born Indian couple Mr. and Mrs. Das with their children visit to India to see Udaigiri and Khandagiri, and, eventually, Mrs. Das narrates her life’s dark secrets to their chauffeur Mr. Kapasi. The story of Boori Maa who suffers severe mental torments for her lost family, prosperity, land, and home is in the fourth story ‘The Real Durwan’. The next story, fifth one, ‘Sexy’ is the best example of the ideal blending of two diverse cultures. Small boy Rohin’s conversations with Miranda change the perspective of her, and help her to overcome an illicit physical relationship with a married man named Dev. The portrayal of the experiences of an Indian migrated couple, Mr. and Mrs. Sen, in America is in the sixth story entitled ‘Mrs. Sen’s’. Sanjeev and Twinkle’s successful compromise for organising any task, despite of a lot of conflicts and contradictions in the outlooks regarding religion and belief, exhibits in the seventh story ‘This Blessed House.’ The eighth story ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ is based on an unwanted child conceived by Bibi Haldar after getting sexually assaulted. The infant shifts the protagonist from neurotic, spinster, and overwrought state of mind to normality. ‘The Third and Final Continent’, last and ninth story of the book, explores the struggling story of a narrator who presents his across the continental journey with aspiration of better opportunities. His struggles in England make him mentally and physically strong to tackle every hostilities of diasporic existence, and earn respect in alien land. Shuchen extends her views about the book, “The nine stories have in common certain themes and motifs, such as exile, displacement, loneliness, difficult relationship, and problems about communication.” (Shuchen, 126)

The second story of the book ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’ exhibits the diasporic sensibility of a Bangladeshi scholar who had left his war-ridden family in Bangladesh, and came in America to study the flora of New England after getting the research grant from Government of Pakistan. A second generation immigrant ten years old Indian girl named Lilia in America is the narrator of the protagonist Mr. Pirzada’s life’s story to the readers who had to compile his research findings in a book form. She introduces the protagonist in the

opening scene of the story as, “His name was Mr. Pirzada, and he came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan.” (When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine, 23) She also explains that he have, “a three-story home, a lectureship in botany at the university, a wife of twenty years, and seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen” (23) in Dacca. In the year 1971, when Mr. Pirzada visited America for his project, a historical civil war of Pakistan took place to transform East Pakistan into an independent country known as Bangladesh. The gloominess as well as the severity of the war can be imagined by this thing that, “Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped” (23) by the Pakistani army. The story is not only a piece of fiction but, actually, it is a kind of autobiography because Lahiri got the brainwave to write this short story through her childhood memories in which she physically witnessed the state of mind of that Bangladeshi man who left her family in his native country during civil war and used to visit her home frequently. Even, she utters about this in her one of the interviews with Elizabeth Fransworth as,

This story is based on a gentleman from Bangladesh who used to come to my parents’ house in 1971..... ” and she came to know from her parents that “what his predicament was.” She further explains that she “learned about his situation, which was that he was in the United States during the Pakistani Civil War and his family was back in Dacca... (quoted by Angalakuduru Aravind, 356)

Although, Mr. Pirzada received the grant from his government but after converting it “into dollars it was not generous” (When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine, 24) and did not make him able to get separate abode for living, stove for cooking foods, television for news or entertainment and other sundry items for living a comfortable life in the alien land, and compelled him to live in a graduate dormitory. Such kind of crisis in the foreign land can make any immigrant nostalgic, and he, therefore, yearns for the comfort and solace of the homeland. On the other hand, Lilia’s immigrated Indian parents, who always invited a new companion from the part of their native land; from Asian continent, invite a Muslim man Mr. Pirzada to home for sharing meal and cherish the memories of their native place. The religious extremism has created a strong invisible barrier of aversion between Hindu and Muslim in India since its independence in 1947 from Britain, and after getting independence Hindu and Muslim sliced up into two parts, and “during Partition” they “had set fire to each other’s homes. For many, the idea of eating in the other’s company was still unthinkable.” (25) But, the Diasporic sensibility develops a humanitarian perspective between two conflicting religions in the alien land like America, and a strong bond binds Mr. Pirzada and



Lilia's Hindu family together in a humanitarian cord. It is a matter of great surprise for a second generation Indian immigrated child Lilia who is not able to comprehend the matter that how two religions in a country creates a breach for living a humanistic life. She expresses her confused state of mind over this mysterious religion disparity,

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. (25)

India was not an unfamiliar country for Lilia. She only learned through her parents' discourses who usually talk about it and in her young age "had been there only once and had no memory" (26) about the country, its inhabitants and their cultures. The episode of the story in which Lilia's father takes Lilia near to a map of the world to make her understand much more about India and its territory shows the longings of an immigrated father who tries to hand over the cultural bags to his daughter who does not know about her identity roots as well as that place from where her parents got immigrated to America. Lilia's parents thrive on American society since their initial days of arriving. But, Lilia encounters with two different cultures in her routine life, and it reflects from her behaviour and actions that she has made herself to cop up with these. In her home she gets acquainted with the culture, tradition and current affairs of that place which is her original identity, but outside the home she accustoms herself to that world where she presently inhabits. She studies in the school only those things which are related to American perspective and its culture only. She learns from there the geography and the Revolutionary War of America, "on field trips to visit Plymouth Rook, and to walk the Freedom Trail, and to climb to the top of the Bunker Hill Monument", and during the examinations receives "a blank map of the thirteen colonies, and asked to fill in names, dates, capitals" (27). Lilia's this fine balance between two opposite cultures is one of the specialities of diasporic existence that makes an immigrated to live successfully in his residing land and, simultaneously, subsist the cultural mores of his native land. Lahiri encounters with this pressure in her life also and shares her view about the projecting of Lilia's this ability as, "Reconciling her two selves as, like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen." (*Newsweek*, 31)

This diasporic existence creates a genuine affection between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family, and Mr. Pirzada's frequent visits in Lilia's home show the attachment of the people. Mr. Pirzada always visits the home after completing his professional work at six o' clock in every evening. The main purpose of his visit is to watch the national news of Bangladesh which is struggling for independence from Pakistan. Watching the news is the only medium for him to get familiar with the recent conditions of his country, and, through this, he make a prediction about the health of his family because "the postal system, along with most everything else in Dacca, had collapsed, and he had not heard word of them in over six months" (24) due to the civil war. The yearning of Mr. Pirzada for his family can be imagined through this thing that before taking his evening refreshment he "took out a plain silver watch without a band," from his "breast pocket, held it briefly to one of his tufted ears," and "wound it with three swift flicks of his thumb and forefinger" to check the present state of the pocket watch, and Lilia had been informed by him that the time of that very watch "was set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead" (30) for making himself with the time of his country. Besides from all these things, he puts "the watch rested on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table" (30) while taking his meals. Lahiri exhibits the diasporic sensibility of an immigrated father through the national news episode in which Lilia's father instructs her to focus on the news of their native continent which is under the gloominess of war. It also depicts the concern of an immigrated Indian father for his home land that can be easily understood by this that he tries to make his child get familiar with the current affairs of their native continent already knowing that she would not be able to understand the things because of her small age and second generation immigrated condition having no memory of her home land. Lilia confesses about her inability to comprehend the politics behind this war in the story as, "my father and Mr. Pirzada deplored the policies of a general named Yahyah Khan. They discussed intrigues I did not know, a catastrophe I could not comprehend." (31) But she understands the pain and suffering of Mr. Pirzada for his family and these things make her empathetic towards the mental distresses of Mr. Pirzada for his family. Lilia narrates this episode as,

At six-thirty, which was when the national news began, my father raised the volume and adjusted the antennas. Usually I occupied myself with a book, but that night my father insisted that I pay attention. On the screen I saw tanks rolling through dusty streets, and fallen buildings, and forests of unfamiliar trees into which East Pakistani refugees had fled, seeking safety over the Indian border. [.....] I turned to look at Mr. Pirzada; the images flashed in



miniature across his eyes. As he watched he had an immovable expression on his face, composed but alert, as if someone were giving him directions to an unknown destination. (31)

Lahiri portrays the affectionate relationship between Mr. Pirzada, the protagonist of the story, and Lilia through his literary brush which can be clearly perceived by the next episode of the story. The empathetic attachment with the protagonist makes him a member of Lilia's family without noticing his religion and homeland. The scene in which Mr. Pirzada ignores the news for helping Lilia to prepare jack-o'-lanterns; "a pumpkin with a face cut into it and a candle put inside to shine through the holes," (Hornby, 829) for Halloween; a tradition in the United States which is celebrated on the night of 31<sup>st</sup> October since 1930s because people believe that dead people appeared from their graves in that night, shows his deepest affection for her, and it seems increasing with the every passing scene. It was the outcome of this relationship that Lilia used to pray for the well being of the protagonist's family and became curious to know about Pakistan. In her eagerness she tries to find the books related to Pakistan and its culture in the school library. For providing the calmness of Mr. Pirzada's mind and emotions, Lilia's parents discuss with him some other things which were not usually related to Bangladesh and the consequences of the war. They "listened to cassettes of Kishore Kumar, and played Scrabble on the coffee table, laughing and arguing long into the night about the spelling of English words" (When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine, 34) till the last telecast of national news at eleven o'clock to every night. Lilia remembers the concern of her parents for the protagonist during narrating the story that they did not only provide the food to him but "called our relatives in Calcutta to learn more details about the situation" (41) because Calcutta is the nearest Indian city from Bangladesh, and it is easy to get fair information about Bangladesh and its citizens from there. She also remembers about the strong and humanitarian relationship between Mr. Pirzada and her family as, "Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, single body, a single silence, and a single fear." (41)

The story concludes with the flying Mr. Pirzada to Bangladesh in the month of January after finishing his research as well as the manuscript of its findings. Although, Lilia and her parents miss his company but it is the matter of great joy for them that he has reunited with his family in the free and independent Bangladesh. His immigration in America was not permanent, neither had he ever think to settle down there. Nevertheless, he has left behind an intense, warm and empathetic relationship with an immigrated Indian family which could be possible only through Diasporic Existence. Lahiri, apart from diasporic sensibility, gives the perfect blend of multicultural identities, divided affinities, increased cultural

contact, fusion of local and global, new identity and new destiny to this story, and these sensibilities make the story recognisable around the world.

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